

INTRODUCTION

The Pharisees asked Jesus when the Kingdom of God would come and where. Jesus' answer was: "The Kingdom of God does not come in such a way as to be seen. No one will say, 'Look, here it is!' Or, 'There it is!' Because the Kingdom of God is within you."

—*Luke 17*

Today, spirituality has two objectives. The first is to help guide us through our deserts. The second is to create intimacy. In order for me to have intimacy with God, I first have to have intimacy with myself. When I can become emotionally honest with my feelings, and bring them to God through prayer, and ultimately share them with the people in my life, true intimacy becomes possible. Ultimately, that is what I've always wanted. Spirituality makes this possible.

Spirituality is the bridge of love between God and us. Spirituality can guide us in our most difficult times, when we feel the most alone. We all seem to be searching for a connection to God, one that is real and can be applied to all areas of our

lives, especially our deserts. Spirituality therefore brings the power for inner transformation.

Like Moses, for many years Don and I had wandered aimlessly, without a connection to God. This led us to believe we had to rely on ourselves, but deep down I always knew that I was not going to be able to make that journey alone. I knew I was afraid, but found it very difficult to be vulnerable with others.

As a fireman, Don could run into a burning building, while others were running out. But, when it came to being vulnerable with others about his feelings, he lacked the faith and spiritual courage to share his feelings with others. Of what was he so afraid? Wasn't it the common fear that if anyone ever knew us, they wouldn't love us? Jesus told us about the Kingdom within. For both Don and myself, today our spiritual journey starts by asking God for the courage to look within, to make the connection between our thoughts and feelings, and bring these to God.

I have spent most of my adult life running from one distraction to another which had kept me from the Kingdom within. But there has always been a yearning, a deep call for intimacy. I knew I longed to be fulfilled, but no matter what I had accomplished, who I had become, there remained a hole in my soul. Eventually the distractions ran out and I was faced with myself. That's when I began to discover spirituality.

Saint Paul's life is an example of how spirituality can change the heart. Before his conversion, he persecuted Christians, but in spite of this God continued to call him. Paul responded and became an instrument of God's Love and an inspiration to new Christians. He became the most prolific evangelizer of the Gospel.

After his conversion, Paul was arrogant. He had all the answers. He wanted to be in charge. But the more he experienced trials such as shipwrecks and prison, the more he went through the desert and the more he discovered God's Love. This love and forgiveness transformed Paul's life. He became kind, patient, and compassionate as he became a channel of God's Love.

Spirituality made all this possible. Three aspects of spirituality—God's Love, Paul's response to this love and the continuing struggles—transformed his life.

We are each born into the world without a sense of identity. As newborns, we don't feel separate from the world. We are expressions of God's Love. For example, Don and his wife Kelly recently had a baby boy named Sammy who has an amazing sense of contentment and belonging. He appears to feel no separation from the world or the people around him. His love is given and received freely. It is obvious Sammy wasn't taught how to love; love simply flows through him. There is a real connection between God's love and this child. The

power of God's Love radiates from within him. Don simply looks at him and receives his love, and he in turn, receives Don's love.

Like Sammy, we come into the world filled with God's Love. We are not separate. As we grow, our parents must get back to their lives, so they can't respond to our cries as quickly as they once did. As our awareness develops, so does our sense of separation and isolation. When we come to realize that we are not connected to our parents, that we are not one with them, we begin to experience the fear of abandonment. Parents are our "gods"; as children we do anything to be loved by them. Our realization that they can leave us creates the tension between fear and faith: the love from within and the fear from without.

As we begin to realize our individuality and separateness, we believe that the love we seek must originate from the outside. We grow older and feel more and more alone. We look to our parents for love, initially, then to our peer groups, then to our marriages, our families and our occupations. We have a need to belong or be in a relationship with others. It is only after we have exhausted ourselves searching for these external connections with people, places and things, that we become willing to accept God's Love.

The desire to reconnect with our Creator is within all of us. If we are ever to be truly fulfilled, and find peace and contentment, we must make

the spiritual journey. This book is about how we become separate and how we can all take the path to reconnect with God's love within us. In these pages, Don and I share what we've discovered on our own paths back to God.

As we continue our spiritual journeys, we, like Saint Paul, are challenged to accept the suffering that results from living in the appearance world. Most of us don't want to accept these daily realities. We think our lives should consist of one happy day after another. When we see loved ones in pain, we want to take their pain away. These attitudes begin in childhood. If we grow up in families in which our outer beauty is stressed more than inner beauty, we become alienated from our feelings and the real people we are.

Most of us never become comfortable in our own skins. We think whatever masks we wear are real. We put our energy into the appearance world, without regard to how we truly feel.

What makes us real as persons is placing a high priority on what is inside. We are real when we are in touch with our feelings. As used in this book, personas are not connected to their feelings; they are concerned with how things appear. For personas, as long as things appear to be going well, that's what is important. In these times, a good example might be people who spend their precious time and energy jogging and exercising while ignoring the stresses that harden their hearts.

When teenagers get into trouble, their parents often have different sets of reactions depending upon whether or not others had seen what had happened. If others didn't see their children causing trouble, the parents reacted differently than if the problems had been publicly observed. In the same way, if parents think that good parenting means protecting their children from problems, they create comfort zones. When children have problems and the parents enable them to escape the consequences, the parents are helping the children to avoid pain. This avoidance is often at the expense of learning valuable lessons.

When we consider why we have pain, it is to alert us to situations that may result in either emotional or physical injury. When we lose the ability to sense pain, the results can be devastating. For example, consider how difficult a divorce can be for a child. If the parents refuse to acknowledge the child's feelings, and instead give toys as a distraction, the child only stuffs his or her feelings. Eventually these stuffed feelings manifest themselves in unhealthy ways. This is also true for adults who look for comfort zones in food, drink, sex, and material things. The feelings that are being avoided do not disappear.

Most of us reach adulthood being more concerned with how we appear than who we really are. We often believe that life should be free of suffering, so we seek to escape difficulties rather than

owning our problems and working through them. It is possible to change this perspective. We mature spiritually when we see our problems as opportunities to grow, real experiences in which we accept that we're not perfect, that we have weaknesses, and that life is difficult; these become opportunities to connect to God. We allow into our lives a God who lets us be ourselves. God gives us the strength and courage to work through our difficulties and discover truths. Looked at in this way, a spiritual journey is a surrender to a loving God.

To summarize: We come into the world feeling connected. As we gain identity, we realize we're separate from others, but still have the need to belong. Our realization of being separate results in the fear of abandonment. Most of us then go on to experience conditional love in our families. This is where we learn to deny our feelings and create personas. Whenever we can't or won't share our true selves with others, we experience isolation and pain. We try to alleviate the pain by creating comfort zones. But no matter how comfortable our zones may be, they never fill the black holes in our souls. Only when we reconnect with God can we experience wholeness and discover the peace that surpasses all understanding.

This book examines the capital sins, not in a way that condemns human behavior, but as they create isolation. This isolation becomes an opportunity to know our emotions, especially our feelings of anger

and fear that can become opportunities to respond to God's grace. We seem to always be much more open when we are in pain. Once we have experienced God's Love, we need to stay connected. We can do that through prayer.

This book also explores practical steps to enable spirituality to flow in our lives. For this to happen, we need to create boundaries. The first step in creating boundaries is identifying what we need. Part of the spiritual journey is learning how to have our needs fulfilled, for only then can we truly be available to meet the needs of others. This process is referred to as building a spiritual program.

The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the word of the Kingdom without understanding it, and the evil one comes and steals away what was sown in his heart. The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it at once with joy. But he has no root and it lasts only for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes, because of the word, he immediately falls away. The seed sown among the thorns is the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit. But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred- or sixty- or thirty-fold.

—*Matthew 13*